



A Second Tour of Duty

Retired military personnel bring a new perspective to public school classrooms.

By Alan Joch

CHARLES B. FLYNN BECAME FRUSTRATED shortly after he started teaching technology at a public school in Massachusetts. The school's computer lab, one of his most important resources, was an unmitigated disaster. Only two of 24 PCs could boot up, and no one was correcting the situation, so Flynn took charge.

He spent an evening writing a computer-repair lesson plan, and the next afternoon he turned his students into PC technicians. "They popped open the boxes, and I walked them through the internal components of a PC," Flynn recalls. One by one over the next week, all but four of the PCs came to life, and the computer lab was reborn.

People who know Flynn aren't surprised by his take-charge approach. After all, he spent more than 20 years in the Navy—a first career that culminated as a second-in-command lieutenant commander on a 3,600-ton guided-missile frigate that patrolled Middle East hot spots.

Now 10 years into his second career,

Flynn is part of a small but growing number of retired military personnel who have joined public schools—often ones with high numbers of special needs or economically disadvantaged children. Most of those, like Flynn, have tapped into Troops to Teachers (TTT), a program started by the Defense Department more than a decade ago that has paved the way for more than 7,600 retirees, National Guard and active reserve personnel to become teachers.

One of them is Rory Waters, who's also a retired naval commander and a TTT veteran. Currently, Waters is the computer lab instructor at the Quad County Alternative School in Starkville, Miss. He prides himself on a well-run classroom where tone of voice, rather than confrontation, commands respect.

"In the military, you learn to deal with all types of people, to recognize their individual traits and read their body language," Waters says. "I applied these skills to dealing with students, and I probably have the fewest discipline problems of any class."

Although Flynn and Waters have flourished in public education, neither says the transition was easy. For one thing, teachers from traditional backgrounds don't always welcome ex-military people.

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come to public education through alternative routes like the military may not be up to snuff," says Chris Carey, state program manager for Mississippi's TTT program, which has placed about 200 military retirees since 1995. "But our people are just as good as other teachers, and we're filling positions in critical subject areas, such as math, science and technology." Carey adds that three TTT alumni have won district "Teacher of the Year" honors, and one has received statewide recognition.

Even when style differences exist, they're usually not insurmountable. "The military way is direct and to the point, and that can rub people who take a more collaborative approach the wrong way," explains Jason McCandless, principal of the Lee Middle and High School, in Lee, Mass., where Flynn now works.

But substance trumps style. "If the work ethic that is present in Charlie [Flynn] is indicative of other people from the military, I'd certainly go that

route" to hire someone else with a military background, McCandless says.

Breaking Down Stereotypes

The two ex-commanders believe a military background brings a lot to classroom management. Flynn and Waters' key military sensibility, a philosophy born on the battlefield, is that no one gets left behind—a mind-set that existed in the armed services long before it was applied to current education legislation. Both men believe that they're only as successful as their weakest student.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, both teachers rarely yell at their students. "Leadership is the ability to cause people to want to go where you want them to go, even if it's into a very unpleasant situation," Flynn says. "That's different from just telling them to go there. You can tell people all day long what they have to do, but whether they do it or not is a different matter."

Troops to Teachers: A New Front Line

Troops to Teachers began with the mid-1990s' military downsizings, as the Department of Defense searched for ways to help retirees find second careers. Now a combined effort of DoD and the Department of Education, TTT pays retirees modest grants for teacher certifications, as well as incentives to teach in schools with large numbers of physically disabled or economically disadvantaged children.

Nearly 90 percent of new TTT instructors qualify for the latter \$5,000 grant, indicating that, along with the money, these teachers are motivated by trying to serve troubled communities, according to John Gantz, TTT's national director. "The vast majority of our people are teaching

in situations where they are needed the most," he says.

Even so, some school districts are skeptical about receiving such help. "There used to be quite a lot of resistance among school administrators who worried about bringing a crusty old Army sergeant in to teach the kiddies," Gantz says. "But we've been able to prove our people weren't just going in and shouting orders."

Instead, TTT alumni view discipline as a subset of leadership. "Part of leadership is taking care of your troops by helping them understand their mission, working as a team and building confidence in you as a leader," says Gantz. "The same theory applies in the classroom."



This isn't to say that Flynn and Waters are pushovers. The classroom commanders expect to be addressed as "mister or sir," a formal mode of address that they extend to each of their students.

Waters' school is home to students who have been removed from traditional settings because of discipline problems; some are even awaiting trial for alleged crimes. "They come here with a lot of baggage, but I feel that I understand them," he says. "A lot of these kids are just looking for respect."

Different Ways of Learning

Flynn, who says he had always dreamed of becoming a naval officer, worked his way up from seaman recruit to his senior rank by following the Navy's evolution into high-tech weaponry and communications systems. For a time, he was responsible for the systems integration of a destroyer's computer-based missile and gun systems, as well as the onboard mainframe computer that managed them. "It involved

a lot of on-the-job training and reading books and technical manuals and studying systems integration schematics," he recalls.

After retiring from the military, Flynn worked briefly in private industry and then moved to teaching, returning to his roots in western Massachusetts. "I was always one of those parents who complained about public education," he says. "So I decided I needed to see it from the inside to [find out] what the problems really were."

But Flynn, whose career included service as a Navy Medical Corpsman during the Vietnam War and provided planning and analysis support in the Persian Gulf War of 1991, admits to feeling apprehensive when he faced his first middle-school class. "Fear of failure was the biggest thing," he recalls. "If I didn't have a successful class, I'd consider that a failure."

After he had spent some time

Rory Waters puts his military training to good use at Quad County Alternative School.

in the classroom, Flynn realized that teachers must constantly try to reach kids and motivate each one to become a better learner.

Flynn's teaching style evolved to include a mix of

instruction and hands-on learning, as in the computer-repair class he started at his first school. Later, he expanded the program in the district's high school, and students who passed received industry certifications in computers and networking.

In one project, the class refurbished about 300 used computers bought from a New York City dealer for between \$25 and \$75 each. All but eight were returned to working condition and found homes in classes and offices throughout the school, saving what Flynn estimates to be more than \$200,000 over new equipment costs. More recently, Flynn brought his certification program to the Lee schools, where he is the technology coordinator.

The Right Skills

Waters credits his military background with teaching him the people skills he needs with students who have been pulled away from traditional settings. He entered the Navy in 1976 after graduating from Auburn University's Reserve Officer Training Corps.

Waters spent his first three years of service aboard the USS Trenton, an amphibious assault ship, and later served on the USS John F. Kennedy, a multiassault aircraft carrier, where he got his technology training as he learned to maintain missile systems.

"I saw a lot of the world, and the good and bad that goes on in other countries," he says. Eventually attaining the rank of lieutenant commander, Waters had his last assignment as an instructor teaching sailors to use high-tech surveillance gear for tracking enemy units.

After he retired from the Navy in 1994, Waters earned his teaching certificate with the help of Troops to Teachers, which also assisted him in finding his job at the Quad County Alternative School. But the school computer lab he encountered there was a letdown after years of working with cutting-edge systems.

Since TTT was subsidizing teacher salaries in the mid-1990s, Waters persuaded school administrators to use those savings to obtain PCs and basic software. Last year, the lab got an even bigger boost: Waters wrote a grant application requesting \$25,000 in state funds. However, because of a paucity of grant requests from alternative schools, the state awarded Quad \$75,000.

"That gave me more than enough for the lab's computers and software, so we bought systems for the teachers as well," he says.

If anyone questions why problem students should get a fully decked-out computer lab, Waters says it's part of the philosophy of not giving up on anyone.

"We get the personal records of all students when [they] come here, but I

don't look at them because I don't want to prejudice anybody," he explains. "Their problems may have been the result of a personality conflict with a teacher or principal or from something that was happening in their lives."

Waters believes building a cohesive team hinges on respect. "We make the students accountable for their actions," he says. "They understand what I expect and what my rules and procedures are."

"If they don't follow the rules, I don't yell. I make them do it again. When a student gets into trouble, I say, this is what you did that was wrong, and this is why. Then I give them another chance. In the military, we constantly practice how we fight a war. Here, I have kids practice the way I want them to act."

The military way seems to be working. According to Waters, "We now get principals [from traditional schools] come in and say, 'What have you done? We could never get so-and-so to do any work.'"

Both Flynn and Waters say that one of their biggest frustrations when they transitioned from the military to education was the lack of ongoing training available for teachers. "In the military, you literally train, train, train," Flynn says. "That helps you get better, and it's also a great morale booster."

However, teachers often must pay for career development out of their own pockets. To counteract that, Waters has devoted time to helping his colleagues enhance their computer skills.

Along with such frustrations, there are rewards. "If a student



Charles Flynn, who teaches at Lee schools, says teachers must motivate every student to be a learner.

trusts you enough to ask for help, there's not enough money in the world to make you feel

better than that," Flynn says. "The biggest reward is the smile on students' faces when they realize that they can be successful." ■

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By the Numbers

For 11 years, Troops to Teachers has helped more than 7,600 retirees, National Guard and active reserve personnel transition to second careers in education.

Average age of TTT instructors: 42 years old

Ratio of men to women in TTT:

81 percent to 19 percent

Ratio of men to women among public school teachers: 21 percent to 79 percent

Noncommissioned officers in TTT in 1995: one-third

Noncommissioned officers in TTT in 2005: two-thirds

Percentage of TTT teachers represented by minorities: 42 percent

Percentage of TTT graduates who continue teaching after five years: 75 percent

Source: Troops to Teachers